

## **Flirting with Uncertainty: Mutability, Metamorphosis, and Fashionability in the Greco-Roman Imagination**

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### **Abstract**

For many ancient Greek and Roman men, fashion was fear: fear of the unknown, fear of the other, but most importantly, fear of the uncontrollable. The distinctly female ability to adopt and maintain multiple identities- shifting from daughter to wife to mother- was essential to the success of the creation of stable familial units, ensuring that wives could effectively transfer their loyalties from their natal households to that of their husbands. Despite the fact that Greek and Roman societal structures obligated women to take on multiple guises, their ability to do so fostered deep anxieties in their male counterparts. These anxieties centred on the limits of female mutability. For if change continued unchecked, women who might once have made respectable brides could become literal shapeshifters, monsters such as Medusa and Scylla, existing on the borders of society, out of the boundaries of male control. While living women could not shift from woman to beast in the manner of their mythic counterparts, they had the ability to exert their agency through mimetic acts, deliberately altering their physical appearance using cosmetics, dress accessories, and clothing.

Such trappings of femininity loom large in both Greek and Latin textual sources and in visual representations of female dress. This article will explore the range of ways in which Greek and Roman audiences articulated connections between fashionable dress and both physical and mental alteration. By analysing sumptuary legislation and moral discourse on female dress, it will argue that the fear of semiotic confusion central to myths of female monsters was articulated in the real world through a distrust of fashionable women. But while textual sources give insight into the male viewpoint, to

grapple with potential female conceptualizations of selfhood and its connection to self-presentation, we must turn to the visual. Through a close visual analysis of the wall paintings of Room 5 in the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii, this article will conclude that while Greek and Roman men might have believed that fashion made women into monsters, in the hands of women, fashion was an instrument of transcendence. In the complex visual sphere of Room 5, the reduplication of depicted dress and adornment allowed women to exert the positive aspects of mutability, picturing a metamorphosis from woman to goddess, rather than from woman into beast.

Keywords: shapeshifting myths, Roman costume, Villa of the Mysteries, mimesis, sumptuary legislation

The threads that connect femininity, fashionability, and fear are woven tightly into the consciousness of Greek and Roman men. These threads converge in the original story of womankind itself: Hesiod's Pandora is not an ideal, but an image (King, 1998, p. 24). His almost ekphrastic treatment of her story presents her as a work of art, gifted with a calculated beauty that is both the indicator and the instrument of her deceit. Her mission requires physical beauty, and the text draws a parallel between the ornamentation of her form and her ability to lie. A single line after Athena draws together her ensemble, Hermes gifts her with “fashioned lies and wheedling words and thievish character” (Hesiod, 2006, p. 59). The only descriptive terms applied to her concern either her appearance or her dishonesty. She is created to beguile, and the task that the gods intend for her, to introduce suffering to mankind, is furthered by both her form and the trappings that adorn it. What ability she has to effect change is predicated upon her physical appearance.

Pandora is constituted by her clothing. Her existence depends on her accoutrements, and her personality is defined by them. Her fashion is her agency. This connection between the ability to alter one's physical appearance through the use of adornments

and the potential for disaster is equally important for human women. Just as it is in Pandora's nature to deceive, so too do human women turn to aesthetic deception as a tool to further their own goals, ensnaring mates by altering their physical appearance with carefully crafted costume. This article will consider the implications of the relationship between a woman's power and her personal appearance first by evaluating the story of Mestra, a mythical woman whose physical mutability underscores societal fault lines. After discussing this extreme end of the spectrum, we will then turn our attention to a discussion of attempts to curtail female expenditure and expression through sumptuary legislation, before concluding by contrasting this textual evidence with an example from the material record; the representation of women in Room 5 of the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii.

The mimetic potential inherent in women and their skills in imitation and deception make them a locus of instability in many Greek and Roman texts. The very mutability that is manifested visibly through the use of cosmetics and personal adornments makes possible the necessary shift from daughter to wife to mother. Yet, if left unchecked, this ability to change oneself physically and mentally could lead to disastrous results, enabling a woman to portray herself as something that she is not, to play the devoted wife while acting counter to her husband's interests, as in the case of Medea, or enabling her to avoid playing the role of wife in its entirety, as Helen famously managed. Aristophanes makes the point bluntly in the *Thesmophoriazusae* (Aristophanes, 2006, p. 396). If a woman can use cosmetics to hide her blemishes and accentuate her form through her choice of clothing, what is to prevent her from using the same cloth to hide lovers from her husband's eyes or to feign pregnancy in order to pass off another man's sons as legitimate heirs, undermining the stability of her household? This tension between a woman's generative capabilities and her capacity to transgress can manifest itself physically, or at least it can in a set of shapeshifting myths that have their roots in Greek texts, but that maintain their potency through the Roman Imperial period. The act of shapeshifting is not the sole purview of women in either Greek texts or their Roman counterparts, many of which build upon the precedent set by earlier writers. As

Kirk Ormand has noted, male shapeshifters retain the ability to take on new forms throughout their narratives, and these shifts are neither constrained by nor linked to particular social structures (Ormand, 2004, p. 304). When men change their physical shapes, this underscores their agency and helps them to achieve their goals. But for women, shapeshifting is more of a vexed issue. The decision to change forms is an avenue that is only open to unmarried women, and in Greek narratives concerning female shapeshifting, the avoidance of marriage is the primary goal of the shapeshifting act (Ormand, 2004, p. 303). This pattern is illustrated clearly in the story of Mestra, a woman whose ability to alter her external appearance allows her father to offer her up to multiple husbands.

Mestra's father Erysichthon, cursed by Demeter to suffer endless hunger, devises a stratagem by which to satisfy himself: he will continually offer his daughter in marriage in order to obtain an ever-renewing supply of livestock. As Ioannis Ziogas notes, animals are "routinely" given as gifts from a bridegroom to the bride's father (Ziogas, 2013, p. 142). While in a typical marriage such a gift would only be given once, Erysichthon's hunger requires a greater number of gifts to feed it. Thus, in order to receive more gifts, he acquires more grooms. After being married off, Mestra changes shape from a woman into a beast, makes her way back to her father's house, and reverts back to a woman, only to be sold into marriage again the following day. This iterative cycle is finally broken when Poseidon abducts her, beds her, and she produces a son (Hesiod, 2006, pp. 137-141).

Mestra's ability to change forms is dependent upon her existence in a liminal state. While she is in the process of transforming her identity from daughter to wife, she cannot be properly controlled. She has a finite window of time in which to assert her agency. After she has been properly assimilated into her husband's home, as is evidenced by the production of children, she is tamed, and her agency is subsumed by his. The correlation between woman and animal, and the necessity of domesticating a wife, is a common trope in Greek poetry (Ziogas, 2013, pp. 142-143). As Helen King

puts it, "The domestic dog is comparable to woman in Greek thought, being a predatory beast taken into man's service, hovering between wild and tame" (King, 1998, p. 24). Mestra's initial marriages make this notion literal. She is a woman while under the control of men, and a beast while in her transitional state, underscoring the stabilizing force of the male influence and of the institution of marriage. Mestra's tale is a best-case scenario for both female shapeshifters and for the more average woman; for some, the integration into a new household is undermined, either by the wife's desires or by the husband's inability to properly assert his authority over her. In these instances, women are presented not only as beasts, but as monsters.

At the heart of the Mestra story is a warning; if women are left unchecked, they might become uncontrollable. The need for personal control might dominate in the male sphere, but in the case of women, sexual control is key. The fear that women might let their sexual desires go unchecked, that their appetites for sexual gratification might parallel those of Mestra's unfortunate father, underlie the desire to tame one's wife. Without this intervention, a woman's appetite might know no bounds, and her potential to amass personal power might be similarly limitless. Stories of powerful women such as Circe illuminate such fears.

As presented by Homer in the *Odyssey*, Circe is one of a series of women who, through their beauty and their skill, manage to detain Odysseus, undermining his quest to return home to Ithaca. Circe is both unmarried and powerful; her skills in the art of witchcraft give her the ability to literally unman Odysseus' company, even as she figuratively unmans their leader (Homer, 1996, pp. 162-163). Using potions, she changes his men from humans into pigs; given the colloquial Greek association between the word for pigs and that for female genitalia, the shift is telling. Her actions make physical the fear that a woman's power subverts a man's. Yet even for a woman such as Circe, a woman who has abilities far beyond that of her non-mythical counterparts, her power is rooted in her physical appearance. Even before they fear her for her spells, Odysseus' men admire her for her beauty. And it is her beauty that proves to be her most dangerous

weapon. Odysseus obtains the means to counteract her magic, but even so, she lures him into her bed and away from his task.

Removed from the boundaries imposed by society, Circe is able to sabotage Odysseus' self-control, the hallmark of Greek manhood; such an ability is dangerous enough, but her capacity to subvert the natural order, a capacity that is implicitly shared by living women, is fully realized in the hands of another author. Mestra has the ability to choose to change her form; Circe has the ability to permanently alter that of someone else. In a story that makes Circe's treatment of Odysseus' men seem benign, Ovid relates the circumstances that led to the creation of one of the best known monsters in Greek and Roman myth, Scylla the sea beast (Ovid, 1955, pp. 338- 341).

At the outset, the story of Scylla's transformation fits nicely into the paradigm suggested by the story of Mestra. While most readers are familiar with Scylla's monstrous form, presented in texts from the *Odyssey* to the *Argonautica*, fewer are aware of how she obtained this monstrous visage. Ovid's Scylla starts life as a beautiful nymph (Lowe, 2011, p. 261). This beauty proves to be her downfall; when faced with an unwelcome suitor, she rejects his advances. This attempt to avoid marriage is itself a potentially dangerous transgression, one that is made more so by the intervention of Circe. Circe, in love with the man that Scylla rejected, forces a transformation upon her rival. She curses the water in which Scylla bathes, mutating her into a monster with tentacles for legs and a waist ringed with dogs. Circe's vindictive act helps Scylla achieve her goal- she does not, in fact, end up married- but it consigns her to a liminal zone; removed completely from the power of men, she cannot be controlled, and what might be called freedom is expressed textually through a complete breakdown in the societal norms that govern women. Rather than joining a husband's house, she is banished to the ocean. Rather than creating life, she destroys it, attacking the crews of ships that venture past her.

While real women did not possess the ability to physically become something else,

fears centred upon their transgressive and imitative capabilities still germinated in the minds of the men associated with them. A wife who continued to alter her appearance might well be a wife who was not fully under control. Lust for jewels might lead to lust for lovers, and the ability to disguise blemishes with cosmetics could connote inner deceit. In an attempt to keep women and women's expenditures in check, Roman men turned to law as a means by which to remove both the temptation to transgress and the materials with which to enhance physical appearance.

Increasingly, as Rome hurtled along the path to empire, female desire for ornamentation and the beautification of the female form became textual markers of social and moral decline. The connection between women and the potentially debilitating desire for luxury goods, in Roman thought, is associated above all others with the Republican statesman Cato the Elder (Boyd, 1987, p.191). In his speech contesting the proposed repeal of the *Lex Oppia*, the law passed in 215 BCE that limited the amount of gold a woman could wear publically, the colours of dye she could make use of, and the employment of carriages within a mile of the city, Cato likens the women who gathered in the Forum to protest the lack of a repeal to an army. He suggests that their interest in both ornamentation and politics are unseemly, a mark of the extent to which the morals of his time had degraded from those of previous generations. His rhetoric explicitly connects women and women's accoutrements with disaster, calling female avarice and interest in luxury goods "pestilential diseases which have proved [to be] the ruin of all great empires" (Livy, 1905, p. 34.4). While he indicates that men are as susceptible to the vices of *avaritia* and *luxuria* as women, Livy's Cato clearly believes that the desires of women are what will prove to be the most damaging, not only for themselves, but also for their husbands. If husbands give in to the desires of their wives, female expenditures will grow past all bounds, to the detriment of their husbands' property and their children's inheritance.

Cato's speech highlights some of the major grievances put forth concerning the issue of women's adornments, particularly the dual concerns of the effects of personal

adornment on female modesty and on the resources of husbands. For if husbands could not provide the jewels and clothing that wives desired, they might look elsewhere to satisfy their needs. As Kelly Olson writes, “Love of ornament was connected in the prevailing discourse ... to a peculiarly female greed for baubles: jewelry both identified and inspired female cupidity” (Olson, 2008, p. 95). In their desire for fashionable accessories, women, according to male writers, descend to the level of common prostitutes. Livy's Cato intimates as much when he suggests that women may dress more to please other women's husbands than their own, and that if their own husbands fail to provide the accessories they desire, they might look to other men to provide them (Livy, 1905, pp. 34.2, 34.4). Multiple Roman writers echo this fear. The playwright Plautus suggests that even otherwise honourable wives and mothers are undone by the desire to wear fashionable colours like gold and purple and that the need to possess these adornments could be so strong that women might take them as payment for sexual acts (Plautus, 1880, p. 16). Such fears are based in part on the desire to control women's sexual activities, as in the myths of Mestra and Circe, and in part on the prohibitive cost of these luxury goods. Seneca, tutor to the young Nero, equates the female need for adornment with the male need for battle, stating that “feminine madness could not adequately outstrip the masculine version unless two or three patrimonies dangled from each ear” (Seneca, 2011, p. 9.4). These avaricious women are monsters of another sort; their rapacious desires for fashionable goods are comparable to the heads of the hydra; even as one desire is satisfied, two more spring up.

Legal attempts to curtail these expenditures, to bring women to heel, were notoriously difficult to uphold, but the terms that these laws dictate underscore the extent to which fashionability and female power are linked. This is especially evident in the case of pearls. While the start of ancient fads can be difficult to pinpoint, the fashion for pearls seems to be linked to a specific event. Following his defeat of Mithridates of Pontus in 61 BCE, the Roman general Pompey Magnus was awarded a triumph in Rome. As was typical of triumphal processions, Pompey showcased the spoils of his victory, including



massive amounts of pearls and emeralds. The rarity and exotic nature of these stones sparked a seemingly instantaneous interest amongst Roman matrons, and pearls in particular soon became a locus of fashionability. It is therefore interesting that pearls are addressed specifically in Julius Caesar's sumptuary legislations of 46 BCE. In an attempt to restore stability to the family unit and to spur population growth, Julius Caesar restricts the wearing of pearls to married women who have produced at least one living child (Kunst, 2005, pp. 137-139). In an inversion of the typical Roman male attitude toward fashion, Julius Caesar, rather than prohibiting it entirely, offers it as incentive.

While it is evident that men harbour deep anxieties concerning both fashionable items and the women who wear them, it is less certain how Greek and Roman women conceptualized their own self-presentation. With a severe dearth of texts produced by women, we do not have their words. But we may have another source at our disposal; the visual record. By way of conclusion, I turn now to the Villa of the Mysteries. Constructed in the first half of the second century BCE, renovated in the mid-first century BCE, the villa is situated some 400 meters northwest of Pompeii proper. From the time of the villa's rediscovery in 1909, the painted figures of Room 5 have captivated modern viewers (Bergmann, 2007, pp. 240- 244).

Of the 29 figures depicted in Room 5, only one can be definitively identified. Dionysus, the god of wine and festivity, lounges in the lap of a woman on the wall that greets the viewer as she enters the space. Various identities have been suggested for both the woman associated with the god, as well as for the women and mythical creatures that ring the space. For our purposes, the identities of the figures in Room 5 are less important than the articulation of their adornments and the relationship between the dress accessories depicted in the mural and those that existed in reality.

With its emphasis on women and on the interactions between these women and

mythical figures, the mural in Room 5 of the Villa of the Mysteries deliberately blurs the boundaries between reality and depiction, inviting the viewer to interact with the painting, to consider the relationship between the painted figures and the living populace of the room, and perhaps even to imagine themselves as part of the world that the depicted figures inhabit. This invitation is insistent. As one moves around the room, the divisions between viewer and viewed become as indistinct as the lines between real and depicted; the lines of sight of the painted figures, gazing at each other across walls and corners, are interrupted by the human viewer, whether that viewer is sitting on a couch, or walking around the space. When one moves into a painted figure's line of sight, one is integrated into the imaginal space of the mural.

This conflation of reality and depiction is underscored by the jewellery worn by the painted women. All of them wear a set of adornments that clearly correspond to extant examples of the region that would have been worn by living humans. Each of the depictions of jewellery is potentially interesting, but for the sake of concision and clarity, I will restrict my focus to one of the pieces in the room that is the most often repeated: a gold ring with a red stone.

The ring appears four times within the space. First, on the left hand of the woman seated immediately to the left of the primary entrance into the space. Second, on the left hand of a woman in a blue tunic who strides away from the room's secondary entrance. Third, on the left hand of another seated woman, who rests her right hand on the shoulder of a young boy reading from a scroll. The final iteration of the ring is on the left hand of the woman against whom Dionysus lounges. Unlike its counterparts elsewhere in the room, this stone is not depicted at an angle, and its surface is shown in greater detail. In Maria Barosso's watercolour facsimile of the mural, a white line curves down the center of the stone.

In colour prints taken relatively shortly after the excavation of the villa, the stone is

represented in two shades of red, perhaps in an attempt to depict engraving (Maiuri, 1931, Plate 8).

A piece of jewellery may connect these women, but it does not equate them. To suggest a closer connection between figures, we must look to jewellery ensembles, rather than at individual pieces. In the case of the woman seated to the left of the entrance, often referred to as the matron, and the woman seated with Dionysus, the visual connection is further underscored by the mural's composition. Both women are seated, both wear a piece of jewellery that features a gold armband and bracelet, and both wear a costume that combines gold and purple. These similarities draw the eye between parts of the room and encourage the correlation of two types of women. The close association of Dionysus with the woman seated with him places her within the mythological realm, whether or not she is in fact a mythological personage. The women on the far side of the room appear more like women in an everyday context. Repeated jewellery draws these two realms together.

The conflation of the fantastic and the everyday is especially evident in the case of the figure against whom Dionysus reclines. Nothing except her close proximity to the god and compositional similarities with other depictions of Dionysus with various women hints that she is anything but a mortal. Indeed, her jewellery suggests that she is to be connected as much with the non-mythological world as the world of the god. This is perhaps to be expected if the figure is Dionysus' wife Ariadne, who was not born a goddess, but made one. She is both goddess and mortal, and this duality is reflected in the representation of her dress and accessories. The verisimilitude of her jewellery connects her to the mortal world; the reappearance of a similar ensemble on apparently human figures elsewhere in the depicted space further highlights the connection between the mythic and the real. Shoshanna Kirk has noted that this sort of blurring of the lines between goddess and mortal is not uncommon in Italian art. As she puts it, "The divide between the 'imaginary' world of the gods and the 'real' world of human experience simply did not exist in the mind of the ancient viewer" (Kirk, 2000, p. 106).

The same jewellery that links Ariadne to the mortal world connects living mortal women to the realm of the goddess. The room's primary function was most likely that of a dining space, and guests would have reclined upon low couches situated around the edge of the room. Female guests could well have worn colours, hairstyles and accessories very like those depicted on the walls behind them. While visual comparisons could be drawn between any living and depicted women in the room, an especially pointed correlation might be made between Dionysus and the woman against whom he leans, and the individuals who might have dined on the couch in front of it. The individuals seated before this portion of the wall would have been juxtaposed against Dionysus and Ariadne, appearing to almost become a part of the scene behind them, an effect which would no doubt have been intensified as the night wore on, sources of light changed, and the viewer became more inebriated.

This is a situation much like that observed by Bettina Bergmann at the Villa at Oplontis, where she notes that “representation ... enters into a dialogue with the world as seen” (Bergmann, 2002, p. 102). At Oplontis the dialogue Bergmann discusses is largely framed around depictions of landscapes and architectural views that intersect with actual gardens and architectural features in such a way as to juxtapose reality and depicted, often to the confusion of the viewer. In Room 5, a similar sort of dialogue seems to be carried out through depictions of people and their real life counterparts. If a man sat on the couch together with a woman, it would be difficult to avoid comparing them to the divine pair behind them. Indeed the impulse to draw such connections might have been stronger in the case of a potential female diner. Her personal adornments, comparable to those worn by the goddess behind her, would invite comparison, just as the depiction of a common ring throughout the mural invites the viewer to associate the depicted mortal women with the goddess who shares so many compositional similarities with them.

The composition of the painting also offers up material for comparison between the world of the painting and the world in which the viewers lived. Dionysus reclines drunkenly, his partner sits, and it is possible that this configuration references Roman

seating conventions. Traditionally, men reclined, but modest women sat upright. However, as Matthew Roller convincingly argues, the idea that women should sit at dinner is more a moralizing stance than a reflection of the actual dining practices of Roman women. In light of this disparity, he goes on to suggest that “any representation of women's dining posture is ideologically invested” (Roller, 2003, pp. 378-379). Roller notes that when women reclined, their posture was easily associated with sexual availability, while their position below a man on the dining couch marked a legitimate sexual connection (Roller, 2003, p. 402). Indeed, the idea that women should sit upright and keep their intake of wine to a minimum seems to have been connected in large part to a desire to control women's sexual proclivities. For, as Roller indicates, in the Roman mind the heavy consumption of wine is linked to sexual transgression; lapses of female modesty occur when women become intoxicated (Roller, 2003, pp. 403-404).

Yet, the mural does not play to these expectations. It is Dionysus, not Ariadne who appears to have over imbibed. If anyone is compromised, it is he. And while he elevated Ariadne's status, she appears to be the more powerful of the two. Most depicted figures gaze into and around the room. They are active participants, and their actions appear to affect their surroundings. In contrast, the god is curiously passive. Dionysus' gaze is firmly fixed on the woman above him. He is unaware of the events unfolding elsewhere in the depicted space. The process of viewing Ariadne has consumed him, and he has given himself over to this task. Her presence has undermined his ability to take action and to affect change. Ariadne's beauty and sexual desirability has been cited as enticement for an erotic male gaze, a gaze that underscores the sexual and societal dominance of the male viewer (Fredrick, 1995, p. 273). But Ariadne's ability to capture that gaze could just as easily be read as a reference to a woman's power and the hold that a beautiful woman has over those who view her. With her compositionally central location, the goddess commands the gaze of the living viewer just as she monopolizes the attention of her male counterpart. If the ability to draw attention is indicative of power, then she is perhaps the most powerful figure in the space. This interest in articulations of female power is punctuated by the

very ring that encourages the viewer to take living women into account.

Rings in particular served as marks of position in and around Rome. For this reason, the red and gold ring discussed above is the most contentious piece of jewellery depicted in Room 5. As Ann Stout has noted, gold rings are ideologically and socially charged. In the Republican period, the use of gold rings was initially restricted to nobles having held the curile office and their male line, although by the Third Punic War the right to wear a gold ring had been extended to equites and military tribunes. By the time of the emperor Tiberius, these restrictions were relaxed and were no longer based upon the holding of public offices. Instead, in order to wear a gold ring in the early empire, a man had to be freeborn with a freeborn father and grandfather, and he had to possess at least four hundred thousand sesterces (Stout, 2001, pp. 77-78).

The rules governing women's use of gold rings are less straightforward. Pliny the Elder writes that the typical betrothal ring was iron, without a stone, but it is certainly possible that he relates the most conservative options as a moral argument against the excesses of his time. Tertulian mentions women with gold wedding rings, suggesting that such rings were customary by the second century CE. Stout suggests that this custom predates the literary mention, which is not unlikely. However, she cites the ring depicted in the Villa of the Mysteries as proof of her assertions, which is more problematic (Stout, 2001, p. 78). Certainly, the composition of the vignette surrounding one of the female figures in Room 5 suggests that she is a bride.

But the presence of this figure does not cement the nature of the ring. We might be more confident in associating the ring with marriage if the left hand of the woman at her toilette was visible. A ring was typically gifted to a would-be bride at the occasion of her betrothal, and thus the figure that we have assumed is depicted preparing for her marriage rites would be expected to have such a ring already on her finger.

While the ring could be a betrothal ring, this is not the only way to read the piece. If the ring is indeed engraved, as the detail visible on the depiction of Ariadne's ring suggests, this opens up another set of interpretive possibilities. A ring might be engraved for a

number of reasons, from the decorative to the apotropaic, but in each case the presence of engraving allows the engraved ring to serve in a capacity in which a ring that is left uncarved cannot. In particular, rings with engraved stones can act as signets.

Signets were typically used to conduct official business, which we tend to associate with the domain of the *pater familias*, the male head of the household. However, as Richard Sallers has noted in his attempts to better define the terms *pater* and *mater familias* “the legal discussion of *pater familias* as owner-testator certainly applied to female owners as well” (Sallers, 1999, p. 185). While it would be limiting to think of all of the jewellery depicted in Room 5 as representations of jewellery owned by the women of the house, the special care taken to delineate the decoration of the stone of the red ring suggests the possibility that this ring is meant to be understood as a signet. It is tempting to associate the potential presence of a signet, paired with the room's ongoing interest in women and women's shifting roles, with the possibility of a female owner of the villa. If this were the case, we would assume that the paintings were commissioned by someone who wanted to commemorate this fact. Perhaps the patron was not a man, but a woman.

It is fitting that this complex negotiation of reality and depiction, of goddess and mortal, of female power, beauty, and the relationship of that power to the woman's ability to adorn herself, occurs around the person of Ariadne. For her shapeshifting story has one of the few happy endings in the Greek or Roman mythological corpus. It is a story defined by her dual abilities to act and to accurately judge the situation at hand. She devises the solution that allows Theseus to navigate the labyrinth. When he abandons her on the island of Naxos, she is once again clever enough to seize the opportunity that Dionysus' arrival affords her. If agency is dependent upon the ability to choose, then it is Ariadne's agency that rescues her from ignominious liminality. Her beauty and her power transfix Dionysus, sparking her transformation not into a monster, but into a goddess. In the visual milieu of Room 5, this is a shift open to all mortal women, and it

is signalled through costume. In this complex visual sphere, transformation is a positive force, and women's adornments do not morph them into ravenous monsters lusting for gold, but into goddesses.

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<http://www.lsa.umich.edu/kelsey/publicprograms/barossowatercolorconservationproject>

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